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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A FITNESS MENTORING PROGRAM ON LIFE SKILLS IN AT-RISK YOUTH

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**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A FITNESS MENTORING PROGRAM ON LIFE SKILLS IN AT- 1
RISK YOUTH**

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A FITNESS MENTORING PROGRAM ON LIFE SKILLS
IN AT-RISK YOUTH**

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: The Aspire program is an eight-week program for troubled youths around the Canberra, Australia community that is run by former Canberran of the year and Canberra Raiders Captain Alan Tongue. The program aims to build self-esteem, develop social skills, help teach the effects actions have on others, understand how practice and hard work provide support, give purpose in life, and teach other practical, lifelong skills. During the program, Alan uses a combination of various activities including fitness, teamwork, discussion, writing, and self-reflection to help youth see their potential. **PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study was to examine the lasting effects of the Aspire program. **METHODS:** Twenty-six of last year's participants across six schools were interviewed ten months after the program had taken place. Qualitative data was taken via group discussion, while quantitative data was taken via an eleven-question survey. **RESULTS:** Overall, the program received positive feedback from both the students and the youth workers in both qualitative and quantitative responses. **CONCLUSION:** The Aspire program had a positive effect on the participant's behaviors, confidence, and outlook on life after ten months post-program.

Introduction

Literature Review

There are a multitude of youth programs available around the world. These programs include a variety of topics including community service, leadership, art, writing, etc. However, they tend to share the same goal: improving youths' lives. Recently, there are a growing number of programs focused on helping at-risk or troubled youths. For the purposes of this analysis, *at-risk* will be defined as males and females between the ages of 13 and 19 who fall into one or many of these categories: low economic background, poor achievement in school, unstable home

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life, lack a positive role model, history of substance use, fail to follow school rules, and/or show an inclination towards risky/dangerous actions. One technique that many of these programs utilize to connect with the youths is with sport, fitness, and physical education.

Sport and physical activity have been shown to improve many bodily properties, including physical, cognitive, and psychological (Sallis et al., 2000). Physical activity reduces the risk of heart failure (Hu et al., 2010), lowers blood pressure (Alpert & Wilmore, 1994), lowers the risk of Type II Diabetes (LaMonte et al., 2005), and improves overall health. “There is strong evidence to support the benefits of physical activity on physiological health in youth” (Strong et al., 2005). In terms of the cognitive benefit, Fedewa & Ahn (pg. 530, 2011) found that, “physical activity has a significantly positive impact on children’s cognitive outcomes and academic achievement”. Paluska and Schwenk (pg. 169, 2000) concluded that, “clinically depressed men and women of all age groups found substantial decreases of depressive symptoms following exercise”.

In at-risk youth, these benefits of physical activity are especially present. “The application of structured physical training programs has been shown to positively affect many risk factors for serious problem behaviors of at-risk youth, such as increased self-esteem, increased well-being, increased acquisition of “life skills” like goal-setting and planning, increased values development, and lowered depression and anxiety” (Collingwood, pg. 67, 1997). Many programs for at-risk youth have used physical activity and fitness as an effective way to teach life skills (Goudas et al., 2006; Holt et al., 2012; Papacharisis et al., 2005). Also, “sport often provides an avenue of escape from the poverty and risks that many endure” (Danish & Nellen, pg. 102, 1997), and they “can provide a potent context for enhancing sociomoral growth” (Miller et al., pg. 126, 1997). Even in terms of crime, organized sport can, “contribute to

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reducing youth crime by giving young people a positive identity, feelings of empowerment and by helping youth acquire leadership, teamwork, and self-governance skills under adult supervision” (Carmichael, pg. 2, 2008). Overall, youth sport provides a healthy avenue that meets the needs of youths for excitement, to take risks, and be competitive, as well as to keep them busy, develop problem-solving skills, foster teamwork, provide positive mentors, and create empowerment (Nichols, 1997; Clark, 1992; Gatz et al., 2002).

This study will be analyzing one of these programs, the Aspire program, that youth mentors through fitness. Data was taken and analyzed from participants ten months after the program in order to see how, if at all, the participants were affected by the program with life skills. This research is relevant, as the program continues to grow yet no data has been analyzed from the program to test its effectiveness. In order to fully understand the mechanisms of the study, a breakdown of the Aspire program will precede this section.

A Bit on Alan Tongue

Alan Tongue played professional footy (rugby) with the Canberra Raiders from 1999 to 2011 and was Captain from 2007 to 2011. Even now that he has retired from NRL, he still works with the league as a community ambassador, travelling to communities around Australia and New Zealand to provide programs to improve the local communities. He has a passion for working with the community, and he has been the face of the NRL Voice Against Violence program, which helps to raise awareness about violence against women and children. He stated, “I’ve seen firsthand how NRL Community programs help to educate and empower positive change within communities they touch” (National Rugby League, 2020). He also serves the community by being an Ambassador for Ronald McDonald House Canberra and Full Stop Foundation, Domestic Violence Crisis Services (Canberra) Champion, and is on the board of

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Men of League (National Rugby League, 2020). His work earned him the title of 2017 ACT Australian of the Year.

In 2012, Alan paid a visit to the Bimberi Youth Justice Centre to attend a church service with young offenders. Very few youth showed up, and Alan remarked that, if he had brought a rugby ball, many more would have come (Belconnen Community Service, 2019). Thus, he began working on creating a program that focused on mentoring through fitness, and the Aspire program was born.

The Aspire Program

The Aspire Program was created by Alan Tongue four years ago as a way to connect with troubled youths via fitness. The program takes place in the suburbs of Canberra, Australia. Alan has partnered with Bill Caddey, the Network Coordinator at Belconnen Community Services. Bill Caddey helps receive funding from local organizations, contacts the schools, and arranges the participants while Alan carries out the program with the youths. The two work together closely to keep the program running smoothly, especially as it grows each year.

Purpose of the Program

The purpose of the Aspire program is to teach local youth life lessons that they may not be learning at home. The program is targeted at high schoolers (ninth and tenth graders) who are struggling to focus in school, have a rough home life, get into trouble in school, lack a sense of belonging, and/or show general behavioral issues. The program aids to increase self-esteem, sense of purpose, and ability to work with others. It teaches how their actions affect others, to stay away from toxic people, and steer clear of drug use. Overall, it builds a support group, provides students with a role model, and uses positive reinforcement to show they matter.

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How the Aspire is Different

The Aspire program is set apart from other community programs in a few ways. The program uses fitness as a way to relate and connect with the students. Alan, being a retired professional rugby player, is able to connect with the youth easily, as many of them are also playing rugby or involved in sport. Alan's background in sport versus counseling or psychology (as many other program directors have), helps the students open up and trust him more. The program is also free to students. Unlike other programs, instead of parents signing their children up for the program, schools nominate the youths. The program takes place during school hours, and the schools set up transportation for the students, so there is not anything extra they have to do outside of school hours. This program is different. As one of the youth workers said, "The kids loved it. . . We run a lot of programs here, and they [go to the other programs] once and they say it's crap. . . but this one (the Aspire program) they loved".

How the Aspire Program Works

The program is a combination of fitness, teamwork, writing, discussion, and trust activities. Alan talks to the students about his own hardships, such as when his younger sister died in a car accident at a young age or when he was told he would never be able to play rugby because of his small stature. Then, he discusses how, using perseverance, goal-setting, and belief in himself, he was able to push through and succeed. During the discussion, Alan passes a ball around to the students as he talks to keep them attentive and moving. Each week, he focuses on a different topic. Week One is *Taking Ownership of Your Actions*, week two is *Dream*, week three is *Believe*, week four is *Achieve*, week five is *Life is Like a Deck of Cards*, week six is *Life is a Balance*, week seven is *Healthy Body, Healthy Mind*, and week eight is *Teamwork Makes the Dream Work* (Alan Tongue). The students receive a booklet with activities that coincide with

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each week's topics. Alan also pairs each topic with spotlights on various athletes who have demonstrated extreme perseverance during their careers. By doing this, it helps to show the students that people who started out in similar positions were able to rise above and achieve their goals. To end the program, Alan takes the students to meet the Canberra Raiders rugby team. They spend the session talking and playing with the players, as well as getting pictures and autographs from them. Alan uses this as a way to solidify his teachings and then make a final impact on the students.

The fitness activities the students do are not just about getting stronger. Many of them are about fostering teamwork and trust. Some of the things the students do include having to direct a blindfolded partner through a maze and going through a circuit of exercises while attached to three other students.

Alan also provides the discipline that many of the youths lack. He is strict, but he uses it in a way to teach lessons and encourage the students. For example, each time a student curses, the entire group must complete ten push-ups. Alan is able to create an environment that allows the students freedoms while also keep all the focus on him when he is talking, without other noise or small-talk between the students.

Logistics

A month before the program is set to start, Mr. Caddey reaches out to local schools and asks the faculty at each to nominate students who they think will benefit from the program. In 2018, eleven total schools took part. Each school can nominate up to ten students to participate. The students, along with a faculty member, meet with Alan for two hours once per week for eight weeks. He holds the programs on Thursdays and Fridays at local universities or parks and

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at the Belconnen Community Center with a session in the morning and afternoon. At least two schools attend each session.

How the Program is Funded

This program, which costs a total of \$4,500 AUD (\$3,033.00 USD) per school, is funded via a few different avenues. Each school provides \$500.00 AUD (\$337.00 USD) and the remaining funds come from local service clubs or sponsors. The program has been funded thus far by the Lions Club of Gungahlin, Belconnen, and Canberra Lake Tuggeranong (Belconnen Community Service, 2019). As incentives for the local clubs and sponsors, they get naming rights, promotion in school communities, and presentation entitlements from Alan. Bill is tasked with meeting with local organizations or potential sponsors to present about the program and convince them to help fund it.

The Research

This research project was designed to analyze the lasting effects that the Aspire program had on the students that participated. No research had been done on the program, and Alan and Bill wanted to see if it was effective to decide whether or not to continue the program. On top of its effectiveness, the pair wanted a report to be able to give to potential sponsors to show, with actual data, if the program was effective. They decided that, instead of surveying the students right after the program, they should wait a while to see if the students continued to use Alan's teachings, to look at which messages impacted the students most, and to analyze which activities stuck with them the most.

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Methods

In order to analyze the lasting effects of the Aspire program, nine months after the 2018 Aspire program, researchers interviewed twenty-six students across six of the participant schools. Researchers reached out to each of the schools to ask if the youth workers there could arrange a time during the school week for the students to meet. From then, a researcher met with the students at each school and performed both a focus group discussion and a written survey. The questions primarily fixated on what key life messages the students remembered from Alan and whether or not they had used any of the messages in their lives.

The focus group questions included six open-ended questions, which gave each student a chance to speak. This allowed for the researchers not only to get some qualitative data and real-life examples regarding the program, but also helped to refresh the students' minds about the program. This portion was recorded in order for researchers to get quotes from the students. After the focus group, each student was given a written survey with eleven statements graded one to five. The students were asked to rate how much they agreed with each statement, with one being the least and five being most.

To reduce bias, the researcher who went to the schools and performed the surveys had not helped to teach the program, and was not connected to the program. To reduce the probability of linking students to the study, no personal data was collected from them.

In order to write this analysis, IRB approval was granted to the writer after the research had taken place. Bill Caddey and Alan Tongue granted permission to the writer to allow her to obtain, analyze, and report this data.

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Results

Qualitative Data from Focus Group

The first portion of the research included a six question, open discussion focus group. All of the students were present, and they were allowed to talk openly with each other about the questions. The researcher that carried out the discussion tried to get each of the student's opinions. At each meeting, a youth worker, who commonly works closely with the students, was present and had a chance to speak. The six questions and some of the responses from the focus group included:

1. Tell me about the activities you all did during the program. What are some of the messages you learned from these?
 - “We did a blindfold obstacle course with partners, where one person had full eyes. They had to tell the partner everything to direct them through the course. It was amazing because you could hear your partner over everyone else. Everyone just trusted in one another”
 - “Dominoes. If we do something bad, a domino falls. Each one fall on to your family first. Parents, siblings who look up to you. It starts with us”
 - “There was a deck of cards. Every time you picked a card you had to do a certain exercise to keep your team alive. It was about trust and teamwork, and showed us that you never know what card you'll get. Expect the unexpected”
 - “A lot of teamwork stuff”
 - “They showed us how to use your language with others, and how you should show yourself to others”
 - “We did fitness drills and talked about what attitude to have with sports”
 - “There's a lot of bad things around with our generation, so I think it was good for us to learn how to present ourselves with others”
2. What do you think was the most important message that you learned? Why?
 - “Family. It doesn't matter who is on your team, treat them as your brother or sister”
 - “Be more inclusive”
 - “One opportunity can open up multiple opportunities”
 - “My actions have effects on others”
 - “Don't get involved in drugs”
 - “Never give up in your dream”
 - “Practice does make perfect”
 - “It's okay to fail. Everyone fails”
3. Have you been able to apply any of the messages Alan taught you in your life?

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“I haven’t missed a training session or game unless I was injured since the program”

“I have been more confident in who I am, because there’s only one of me in this world”

“Everything I have done since then. I have thought about how it would affect my family and friends”

“I believe in myself more, and I know if I put myself to it I can do it”

“When I’m running, and I want to give up, I think about the messages, and then I just keep going”

4. Do you think you will be able to use these messages in the future?

“It has inspired me to help motivate other people”

“When I have a kid, I will teach him these messages. Also, I can teach it to my little brothers and sisters”

“Yeah. If I feel like I want to give up, I just will think back on those messages”

“If I am being judged, I will tell them that I am just being myself”

“Even if I fail at something, I’ll just bounce back”

“I was very hot-headed. Now, I can take a deep breath or I can compliment someone instead of yelling. Let my steam out in a positive way”

5. Do you feel like the program helped you grow as a person? How?

“I give people a second chance and respect others”

“It helped me put my mind in a place to find myself”

“I trust people more”

“Hope. Have hope. If you start losing hope you can always lean on others to help you”

“I learned am worthy as a person”

6. How do you think the program could be improved?

“More fitness lessons”

“Have it last more weeks”

“Have different teachers there each week since we get to know them better and like them more”

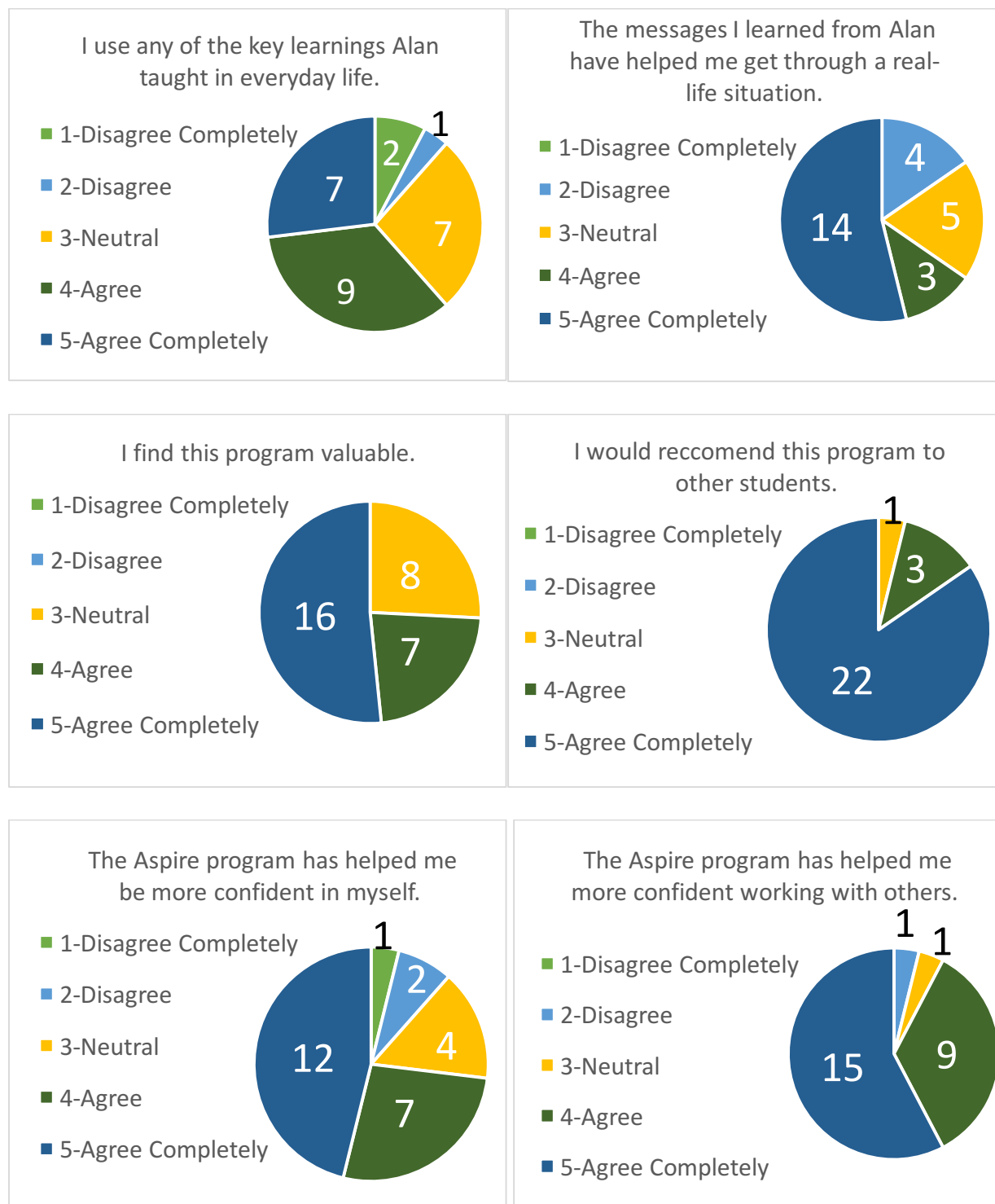
Along with comments from the students, multiple youth workers commented that most of the students that participated had been getting into less trouble at school, doing better in their classes, and overall being more respectful and kind.

Quantitative Data from Survey

Below is the data collected from the written survey portion of the research. The eleven questions have been organized into pie charts, which correlate to the number of students that chose each numerical response. They were asked to rate how much they agreed with each

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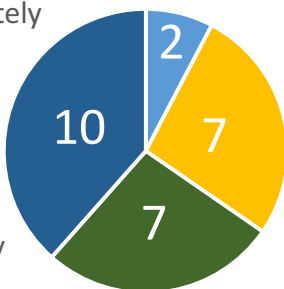
statement from a one to five, with one being disagree completely, three being neutral, and five being agree completely.



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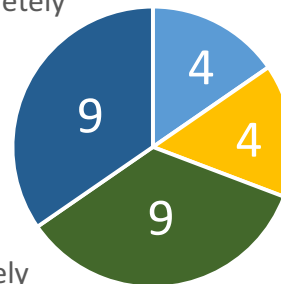
The Aspire program has helped me set goals for myself.

- 1-Disagree Completely
- 2-Disagree
- 3-Neutral
- 4-Agree
- 5-Agree Completely



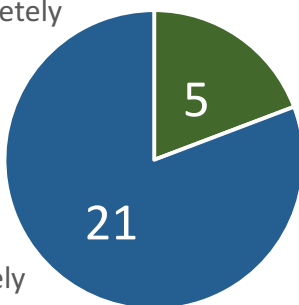
The Aspire program has helped me find a clearer purpose in life.

- 1-Disagree Completely
- 2-Disagree
- 3-Neutral
- 4-Agree
- 5-Agree Completely



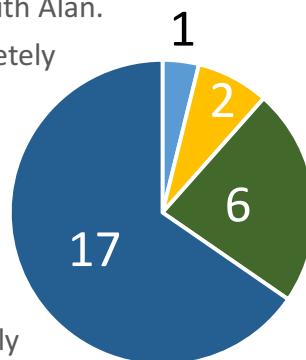
I had fun during the program.

- 1-Disagree Completely
- 2-Disagree
- 3-Neutral
- 4-Agree
- 5-Agree Completely



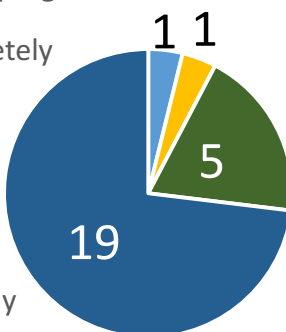
I felt comfortable talking openly with Alan.

- 1-Disagree Completely
- 2-Disagree
- 3-Neutral
- 4-Agree
- 5-Agree Completely



I felt welcomed and supported during the program.

- 1-Disagree Completely
- 2-Disagree
- 3-Neutral
- 4-Agree
- 5-Agree Completely



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Discussion

Overall, the students' and youth worker's feedback from the Aspire program was mostly positive. Over half of the students use the messages Alan taught them in their everyday life, and have used the messages to help them through a real-life situation. Some of the messages that were most commonly mentioned included the idea that their actions affect others, that relying on others for support and help is okay, and to never give up. They were able to recall the stories that Alan had told them about his own challenges that he was able to overcome. Over half of the students were more confident in themselves because of the program and feel more confident in working with others. They really enjoyed Alan, and, even though he was strict, they felt comfortable talking to him. Since the program, the students have been able to set goals for themselves and have a stronger purpose in life.

The students were also able to talk about how the program affected them. The open-discussion questions were a good avenue to hear the students' opinions, as they were able to talk through it with the others who participated in a more casual way than with a written survey. It also allowed for youth workers to provide input. The students recalled many of the lessons Alan taught them, and gave real-life examples of how they had used those messages in their life. They talked about Alan with a lot of respect and admiration, which showed he was a positive role model for them. The student workers were able to give an outside opinion to show how the student's behaviors had changed. Some of them noted that many of the students were getting into trouble less often since the program. Overall, the comments from both the students and the youth workers were overwhelmingly positive.

This study was the first done on the Aspire program. Alan and Bill want to continue to collect data each year to get a better understanding of the effects. They are currently working on

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other methods to evaluate the program more thoroughly. For example, they are planning to have the participants take a survey both before and after the program. By doing this, they would get a baseline measurement and be able to truly measure the effects of the program for each student. Also, they are trying to branch out more to get more schools to participate. With a higher population of students, they would get more data to work with.

Based on the data, it can be concluded that the Aspire program has a positive impact on the at-risk youth that participate. This study adds to the pool of data showing that fitness mentoring programs have a positive impact on at-risk youth. There is a need for further study, however, since this is a very isolated program in Canberra, Australia. While there are similar youth fitness programs around the world, the Aspire program has a few characteristics that sets it apart. These characteristics, which include having a professional sport player as its head, being free for students, taking place over eight weeks during school hours, and having written and physical components, may be more effective as a way to connect with students. Here in America, it would be interesting to have a program run by a professional football, baseball, or basketball player in order to see if that program was more effective than programs taught by other, non-sport professions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of the Aspire program, an at-risk youth fitness mentoring program located in Canberra, Australia. The researchers focused on looking at the lasting effect that the program had on life-skills in the participants. Based on the data, it can be concluded that the Aspire program appears to be an effective avenue for teaching life skills to at-risk youth. This study adds to the hypothesis that mentoring through fitness is an effective means to teach youth. This study reaffirms the conclusions found by other studies that

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fitness can be an effective way to teach life skills in at-risk youth. There is a need for further study, as there were many variables that may have inadvertently affected the outcome. This was an isolated program, and not every program has been set up and carried out in a similar way.

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